

Update from Bob Ferrara '67, Director of FSILG Alumni Relations

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Hello FSILG alums,

This is another semiannual message sent to you every six months regarding MIT's Fraternity, Sorority, and Independent Living Group (FSILG) community. Your support ensures these groups will continue to provide, for current and future generations of MIT students, the intense shared educational and personal development experience that we enjoyed. Today's challenges offer many opportunities to help.

An Overview

The general impression is that the FSILG MIT community continues to improve. Almost half of MIT's undergrads belong to one of the 37 FSILGs active on campus, though many of the students do not necessarily live in one of the 41 FSILG-run residences. In fact, all the members of one fraternity and two sororities currently reside exclusively in the 11 undergraduate MIT dormitories. Contrary to expectations of a few years ago, though, not a single chapter has ceased operations since the Freshman-on-Campus decision was implemented over six years ago. In fact, the community has grown in size.

As with any large, diverse community, progress is uneven and there are some rough spots. For example, one fraternity is having serious issues with the Cambridge Licensing Commission. Our alumni peer review process, known as Accreditation, serves to highlight even more key issues, which are discussed at more length below. Fraternity rush numbers dipped very slightly this past fall, though not due to lack of effort by undergrads and alumni alike. The pool of incoming freshmen men was among the smallest ever, but of these well over half joined during the recruitment ("rush") period before classes began.

The sororities, enjoying another successful year, once again sponsored a campus-wide "Women's Week" this past October. Alpha Chi Omega became the second sorority in recent years to receive the prestigious D. Reid Weedon '41 Award for alumni relations. Green Hall, next door to Baker House, is now the proud home of Kappa Alpha Theta sorority. Also, after a very intense selection process, a sixth major national group, Pi Beta Phi, is now established on our campus. Forty-one women were inducted into the charter chapter this past fall and Pi Beta Phi expects to add about as many this coming spring. Significantly, these new sorority women are coming from all undergraduate classes, not just freshman.

MIT and our community are hardly immune from the economic pressures facing the nation and the world. Despite this, several major capital campaigns are underway, as chapters seek to reinvest and upgrade their properties after several years of deferred maintenance. Just two weeks ago, Chi Phi announced that the successful conclusion of a \$1.5 million campaign to renovate their magnificent Back Bay mansion. Congratulations to campaign chairs Bill Frezza '76 and Ariel Warszawski '90 and their brothers on this milestone! At the same time, the IRDF Community Network Upgrade project is now kicking into high gear. The very latest computer network infrastructure has now been installed in a quarter of the FSILG houses, and the rest should be completed late this summer. Good times or bad, there is always work to be done.

Here are several other newsworthy items from the past few months.

Sensational Smoot Celebration. And there is always time for good works, like the Charles River cleanup that occurred as part of the 50th Smoot Celebration here this past October. Hundreds of folks turned out on a beautiful fall day to clean up the banks of the Charles, finish painting the riverside railings, and to celebrate. As you can see from the photos on the web site at <http://web.mit.edu/smoot/>, a good time was had by all. President Hockfield and several local and state officials helped to get the festivities off to a great start. Ollie and his entire family were there throughout the day, which also included an afternoon performance by the famed 50's group, "The Platters", and an evening party at the MIT Museum. Along with

many others in the MIT community, Ollie's Lambda Chi Alpha brothers were present in force throughout the day.

Dean Chris Colombo has arrived. This past summer Dean Chris Colombo became MIT's Dean of Student Life, after a long stint in a similar post at Columbia University in New York City. Like his predecessor Larry Benedict, Chris has a distinguished professional record in the field. In fact, earlier in their respective careers, Larry succeeded Chris as Dean of Student Life at Johns Hopkins. Small world! Chris is already a major fixture, since he and his family moved right into the middle of campus. A major, though unplanned, initial priority has of course been to deal with budget reductions. President Susan Hockfield outlined the challenges in a [recent letter](#) to the MIT community. It is clear already, however, that he has high expectations for our community and will continue to "raise the bar" for the FSILGs. Dean Colombo will also work to extend the opportunities for intergenerational connections, which our organizations so well provide, even more broadly throughout the MIT. For example, during Reunions this coming June, he is opening his residence for an alumni Open House at Next House, where he is the Faculty Housemaster. Incidentally no less than 17 FSILGs have also signed up to host similar receptions during Reunion weekend, generally on Friday afternoon June 5th.

Living Group Council adds a member. In addition to the new sorority in the Panhellenic Association, the other two FSILG undergraduate governing bodies also underwent membership realignment. One fraternity, Delta Psi (better known as the No.6 Club from its founding at No 6 Louisburg Square in Boston) chose to leave the undergraduate Interfraternity Council (IFC) and become a part of Living Group Council, which now numbers six of the FSILGs. Delta Psi will, however, retain its affiliation with its national fraternity. Because Delta Psi was already the only coeducational fraternity on campus, the transition to the Living Group Council seems a good fit. All but one are now coeducational cooperatively-run groups that disaffiliated with their national fraternities in the 70s. Only WILG, the Women's Independent Living Group, was a completely "new start". As their alums and current active members well know, each of the six has a very special character.

AILG Addresses Common Interests. At the alumni level, there is but one overall coordinating organization, the [Association of Independent Living Groups](#), or AILG. The undergraduates have the 3 mentioned in the paragraph above – the IFC, the Panhellenic Association, and the Living Groups Council. Each year, the AILG is doing more to promote the interests of the FSILGs. This January, during IAP – Independent Activities Period - the AILG is expanding its normal complement of short AILG-sponsored courses for FSILG leaders to six. Along with a multi-evening leadership course, a new session on building Alumni Advisory Boards was just added. AILG Board Member Sara Pierce '03 of Sigma Kappa was instrumental in establishing this new course, along with Steve Baker '84 of Theta Xi. These advisory boards parallel the Alumni Corporations, but focus more on coaching current undergrads, especially the officers. Virtually all the sororities have one and the fraternities are increasingly establishing them. Young alumni can bring a lot to this activity. Ben Pope '08 and Bryan Owens '07 are great examples. A grad student at MIT, Ben was awarded Sigma Chi's highest national honor, the Balfour Award, and now serves his chapter as Advisor. Bryan Owens of Zeta Beta Tau followed a similar path, and has worked to create for his chapter a program pairing each current undergrad in his chapter with an alumni brother of similar professional interests.

The AILG courses have proved to be an effective way to pass knowledge of chapter operations to incoming officers, and now among alumni themselves. Something must be working right, because registrations today are well beyond all previous years. Also the AILG Board has chartered a dozen different volunteer groups to address issues raised by the membership. The MIT administration now actively seeks AILG involvement and input in policies that may affect the community. Two current examples are revisions of the Resident Advisor program and development of a new summer boarder policy.

FSILG Cooperative Success Story. MIT and the AILG both look to the FSILG Cooperative, Inc. (FCI) for carrying through day-to-day operational tasks. Now in its fourth year, the FCI received initial start up funding from MIT but now is wholly owned by the individual chapters. This past year, the FCI passed \$2M in sales, processed over 10,000 invoices and returned increased dividends to its shareholders. Not bad for any startup! The FCI staff is also quick to exploit opportunities. This fall MIT's first graduate dormitory building, formerly known as Ashdown House and now simply as Building W1, was taken off-line for extensive repairs.

(The name Ashdown House migrated to a new 550 bed facility on Albany St. along with the venerable Thirsty Ear Pub). Working with Campus Housing, the FCI saw to it that the slightly used furniture from W1 found new homes in our FSILGs. The Executive Director, Scott Klemm, has also been an important contributor to the Amherst Alley Beautification Project. Amherst Alley runs parallel to Memorial Drive and is becoming a major campus thoroughfare, so five fraternities, MIT, and FCI are discussing how make it an even “greener” route.

Accreditation Reviews: Promoting High Standards. As noted in last summer’s message, every chapter has now been visited at least once in the AILG’s [Accreditation Program](#). After some experimentation and startup issues, these alumni-run peer reviews are proving to be a very effective means to exchange “best practices” and to point the way to even better operations. This peer review process requires the alumni corporation and the actives jointly fill out a detailed questionnaire and meet for a few hours with a carefully selected peer review team. With this preparation, the conversations are rich and mutually productive. But if there are serious issues, they do come to the surface.

Last spring, two groups received a “Not Recommended for Accreditation” finding from their respective review teams. Shortly after, the undergraduates and alums of these two organizations received an e-mail notifying them of this condition, and a months-long, focused intervention by MIT professional staff was initiated. In both cases this intervention proved useful to the groups involved. One cleared up a long-standing legal issue and the other significantly reorganized and re-energized its alumni and undergraduate organizations. Accreditation reviews this past semester have confirmed this progress. As last year closed, however, another group, Alpha Tau Omega, was reviewed and received a “Not Recommended” finding, and the intervention is just getting underway. MIT professional staff will be engaging the chapter officers and alumni to address the deficiencies noted in the AILG report. This has been a very difficult time for a chapter that has a long and largely distinguished history at MIT. After an incident this past summer, the City of Cambridge suspended the group’s lodging house license, forcing MIT to scramble to find temporary housing for the members. The Alumni Corporation president has written the chapter’s alumni membership informing them of these developments and certainly would welcome any support.

The far more typical result from an Accreditation visit is “Recommend Accreditation”, and this has been the case for thirty of the FSILGs. At a handful of others, there has been an intermediate finding of “Recommend with Reservation”. This prompts a revisit the following term. In three cases, the reservations have already been cleared, and the exercise served both to illuminate a shortcoming and to provide resources for resolution. Typical reservations have included increasing undergraduate membership and training, physical issues with the house, and depth of alumni corporation support since MIT now requires an active alumni group of at least five individuals.

Thanks for your help

Alumni support like yours has been critical in restoring the strength of this remarkable FSILG community, and it is likewise needed to keep the positive momentum. Your continued help is deeply appreciated, whether it is connecting with other alums, advocating for your chapter and the FSILG community, doing valuable volunteer work, or contributing much needed funds to your chapter or the [IRDF](#). With this sustained effort, we can indeed continue to have among the very best and most varied college residence communities in the nation.

Thank you,

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NB: This message and all prior e-mails in this series can be found on the Aurora web site at this address: <http://web.mit.edu/aurorarp/community-reports.htm>